

# Unconventional Options for the Defense of the Baltic States

## The Swiss Approach

*Jan Osburg*

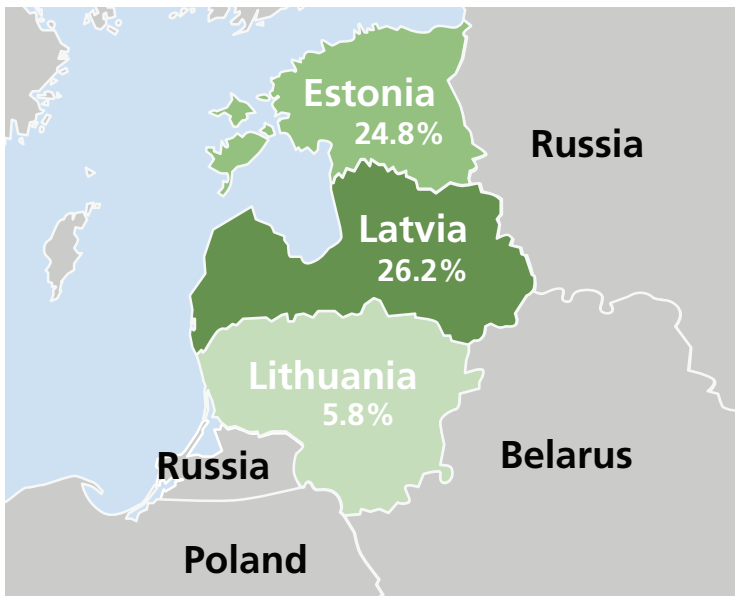
The Russian annexation of Crimea and continued Russian support of militant separatists in eastern Ukraine have generated concerns about the security of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Chivvis, 2015). The first two are—like Ukraine—home to significant Russian minority populations and share borders with the main part of Russia. Lithuania has fewer Russian speakers than Estonia and Latvia, and it borders the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Even in a scenario involving an attack on only one of these three states, NATO would be compelled to react militarily or would have to admit strategic defeat and face an existential crisis.<sup>1</sup> Thus, deterring further aggression, and countering it if deterrence should fail, is of strategic importance.

However, there are several possible challenges to a purely conventional approach to enhancing the defensive posture of the Baltics. Due to the nature of the threat, sizable force packages would

have to be either prepositioned or deployed immediately after the start of hostilities.

Prepositioning sufficient forces would be politically difficult for at least three reasons: It would likely require unsustainable amounts of funding, it might be seen as an escalatory move, and it could introduce a potentially destabilizing first-strike advantage, since prepositioned forces are vulnerable to preemptive strike.

On the other hand, deploying the necessary forces after the start of hostilities risks giving an adversary time to accomplish its objectives, and deployment would be challenged by the adversary's access-denial efforts (Kelly, 2015). In addition—especially if the adversary employs a strategy similar to the one observed during the annexation of Crimea—there may not be a clear threshold marking the “start of hostilities.” Particularly in combination with concerns about escalation, this might delay a deployment decision until it is too late.



2011 DATA FROM CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

*All three countries have sizable ethnic Russian populations (indicated by percentages and shading) and border Russian territory.*

Both limited prepositioning efforts and planning for crisis deployments are already well under way. What else could be done to deter aggression, and, in case of invasion, to buy the Baltic states time until sufficient NATO reinforcements can enter the fight?

Part of the solution might come from considering unconventional options, such as those that were part of the Swiss national defense strategy during the Cold War:<sup>2</sup> training and equipping independently operating local defense units (supported by regular forces in accordance with a national strategy), preparing transportation infrastructure for demolition, and instructing members of the military, as well as the general public, in how to effectively

participate in decentralized, ubiquitous, and aggressive resistance activities, along with a coordinated information operations (IO) campaign. This approach would go beyond traditional civil defense efforts. Recent activities in the Baltic states are already steps in that direction. For example, Lithuania has published emergency instructions for civilians that also cover how to protect and defend oneself in case of civil unrest and invasion, including guidance on joining the resistance (Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, 2015). Recruiting and training for “home guard” militia units has increased in Estonia as well (Laats, 2015).

An integrated strategy would maximize the joint impact of these individual elements, and such a strategy itself must be part of an overarching defense strategy aimed primarily at *detering* aggression. As outlined by Swiss Army major and author Hans von Dach and other proponents of the “Swiss approach,” successful resistance puts enemy troops and supporters at risk, shuts down resupply and lines of communication, and damages enemy infrastructure and heavy weapons.<sup>3</sup> It also denies the enemy use of the occupied country’s infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, railways, power, and communication infrastructure. In this way, it denies the enemy an easy victory by slowing down its forces and preventing them from “digging in,” increasing its cost, and buying precious time for allied forces to assemble, deploy, and fight.

This RAND perspective explores key elements of the Swiss approach against the backdrop of strategic options for the Baltics. However, it does not provide an in-depth analysis of historical precedent or current doctrine, prescribe specific solutions, or review specific ongoing efforts in the Baltics.



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*Example of a Swiss camouflaged artillery position. The structure was chosen to blend in with the surrounding countryside.*

## Elements of a Comprehensive Resistance Approach

Key elements of the Swiss approach can be categorized according to three lines of effort:

1. preparing for infrastructure denial
2. preparing for unconventional military resistance operations
3. preparing for civilian resistance activities.

Of critical importance to all three areas is an IO effort that creates fertile ground from which to recruit, that provides a narrative to motivate members of the resistance, and that mobilizes national and international support for the cause. Von Dach emphasizes that mindset is key to a successful resistance effort, and this is certainly

not limited to the Swiss cultural context. Civilian resisters and those joining the ranks of the military must have a powerful will to endure hardship so that their children, friends, and country may remain free; they must believe in the justness of their cause; and they must have faith that they will ultimately prevail. The general population must understand that it has a duty to at least passively support the resisters.

The IO effort should also counter arguments against preparing for decentralized resistance. Key among them is the fear that such preparations may create a danger to the defending nation, due to the potential for abuse: resistance tools and techniques can also be directed against legitimate governments, and von Dach's book indeed found popularity among European terrorist groups in the 1970s. However, the population of a free country should have little incentive to attack its own government, and information on such tools and techniques is already available elsewhere to those with nefarious motivations. Furthermore, there will likely be acts of resistance by patriots anyway; it is better if those are part of a nationwide effort, with government-provided training, equipment, and coordination enabling their success, rather than noble yet futile sacrifices.

Resistance also brings the risk of retaliation by the aggressor. But, as von Dach points out, brutality will likely be part of the enemy's approach anyway, and every citizen has a moral duty to fight

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*Mindset is key to a successful resistance effort, and this is certainly not limited to the Swiss cultural context.*

for freedom and resist oppression. Opponents may point out that resistance activities conflict with the Law of War. However, measures can be taken to limit such deviations, and it can be argued that uncoordinated resistance by desperate, unprepared individuals acting without any guidance may lead to worse violations.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the IO effort is practical: to distribute essential instructions to the citizenry ahead of time (in the form of pamphlets and books like von Dach's work, but in today's context also through social media and other electronic means). Such materials can serve as ready references in case of invasion but—more importantly—are a tangible demonstration of the national will to resist. According to the Swiss approach, this material should include general instructions for military and civilian resistance operations, but it should also include specific guidance for self-directed actions by members of certain professional groups, such as police officers, medical personnel, utility workers, clergy, teachers, and government officials.

The Swiss approach emphasizes that the legitimate government, in addition to supporting and funding preparatory activities during peacetime, should under no circumstances declare an official capitulation or armistice once hostilities have started; doing so would erode the necessary moral and legal backing for the resistance. This requires careful consideration and communication, ahead of time, of the conditions under which military and civilian resistance operations are authorized to commence, as well as related targeting criteria. This is not a trivial task if the adversary opts for a “stealth” approach, with disguised operatives and unmarked vehicles, as in the early phases of the Crimean annexation.

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### **Preparing for Infrastructure Denial**

Swiss Cold War-era defense strategy included physical preparations to delay an invader's advance. This would buy time for the resistance to form and for outside help to arrive, and it would also deny an invader the use of the country's infrastructure. Specifically, the Swiss prepared every major road, bridge, and other key infrastructure near its borders for rapid demolition. This meant that explosives were either integrated into the structure during construction or kept in caches close by so that engineers with retreating regular forces, or members of the nearest village militia or resistance unit, could install them quickly.<sup>5</sup>

While preparing for the demolition of roads and bridges ahead of an advancing invader is part of the defense strategy of many nations, it works particularly well in connection with unconventional defense strategies that include decentralized resistance units, since it facilitates infrastructure denial operations by the resistance even during an occupation.

Along similar lines, the Swiss prepared camouflaged fighting positions at key locations, such as near tunnels and bridges, near road intersections, or on hillsides, increasing the effectiveness of small units in delaying the advancement of invading troops and facilitating ambushes by resistance units during an occupation.

In adapting any of these approaches to the Baltic context, planners would, of course, need to take into account the differences between the Swiss and Baltic topographies, as well as differences in timelines, demographics, and technologies. (See the discussion starting on page 7.)

### Preparing for Unconventional Military Operations

According to the Swiss approach, forces conducting unconventional military operations should consist mainly of surviving members of the regular armed forces operating under decentralized leadership. These forces will be augmented by volunteers from the ranks of the police, reservists, veterans, hunters, and sport shooters, as well as by civilians with specialized skills in such areas as science and engineering, medicine, communication, infrastructure, and utilities. In the modern-day context, especially in highly developed nations such as the Baltics, this would also include information technology specialists, model airplane hobbyists, amateur radio operators, and others with skills useful for guerrilla warfare and resistance. Some of these volunteers would also be needed by the civilian resistance, as would liaisons to national authorities and allied foreign forces.

The military side of the resistance would operate mainly outside the cities, constantly on the move and thus beyond the immediate reach of the occupiers. The military resistance would therefore also be able to offer refuge to government officials and other well-known personalities at risk of being rounded up by occupying forces.

The size and organization of military resistance units is of critical importance: Units that are too small cannot strike effectively against many targets, but the larger a unit, the harder it is to keep supplied and the easier it is to detect. Von Dach recommends a maximum independent unit size of less than 400 personnel (a “battalion”), divided into three or four company-sized “detachments” that live and operate quasi-independently and come together only for major attacks. The figure on the next page shows the structure and composition of such a unit.<sup>6</sup> Like many other specifics of the Swiss approach, it is based on Cold War–era assumptions regarding both enemy and friendly capabilities and concepts of operation, and it would likely have to be adjusted for the Baltic context.

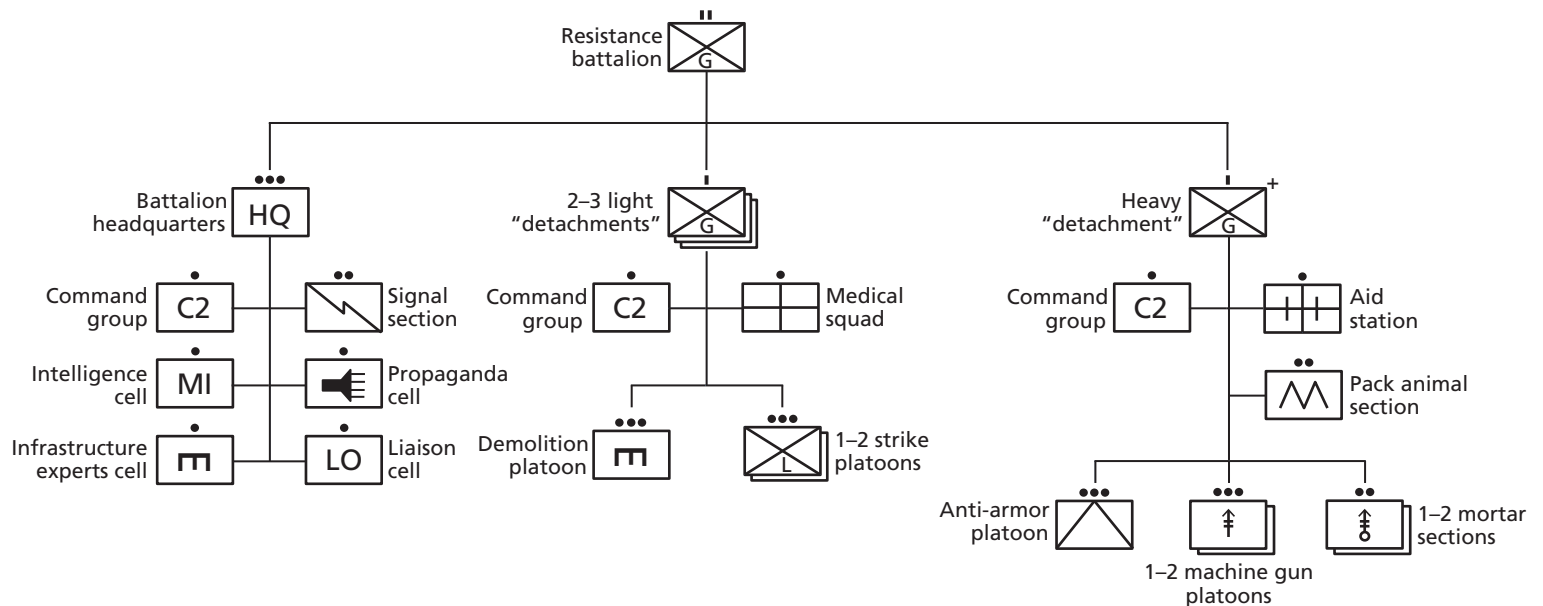
Instructions provided to the leaders of military resistance units should cover such topics as recruiting, small-unit leadership, how to obtain and cache weapons, equipment, and supplies, and, maybe most importantly, how to obtain and maintain the support of the civilian population. Information on likely enemy concepts of operations and associated tactics, techniques, and procedures should be included as well.

Detailed instructions for members of military resistance units should cover areas of specific importance to unconventional warfare, such as wilderness survival and woodcraft, communication skills (including transmitting intelligence reports and targeting instructions to allied forces), and tactical skills, like receiving clandestine resupply, setting up low-profile security positions,

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## Notional Organizational Structure of a Military Resistance Unit According to the Swiss Approach



improvising weapons and explosives, taking out sentries, ambushing convoys, and conducting raids. To support the infrastructure-denial line of operation of an unconventional defense strategy, instructions should cover activities such as sabotaging roads and bridges, destroying fuel and ammunition depots, and attacking airfields and missile launchers.

### Preparing for Civilian Resistance Activities

Under the Swiss approach, the civilian part of the resistance, also called the “underground,” complements the military resistance units described earlier. The civilian resistance will be based mainly in cit-

ies, operating where its members live their seemingly normal lives. It is therefore limited to mostly low-profile activities, like providing intelligence and logistical support to the military resistance, organizing passive resistance, documenting atrocities perpetrated by the invaders, and producing and distributing propaganda. Close coordination with military resistance units will increase the effectiveness of the resistance overall but will have to be carefully balanced against the associated increased risk of detection.

While every citizen can and should join a “passive resistance” movement that provides constant moral and at least occasional practical support, recruiting members of the active civilian resis-



tance is particularly difficult and fraught with peril. Protecting against, identifying, and weeding out traitors and infiltrators is paramount. Therefore, according to von Dach, the recommended size for civilian resistance units is much smaller than that for the military resistance—preferably only a handful of friends who already know and trust each other. Unsuitable candidates include well-known personalities, politicians, senior government officials, journalists, academics, and others who may be on the radar of the occupiers and who should join a military resistance unit instead.

General instructions for the civilian resistance will focus on low-profile resistance activities and on likely enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures. However, some members of the civilian resistance will also need instruction on more controversial topics, such as sabotage, counterfeiting papers and documents, identifying and countering collaborators and traitors, organizing urban attacks, and carrying out assassinations.

### Comparing the Swiss and Baltic Contexts

Beyond similarities in size and population—and in the nationality of the potential adversary—many conditions that gave rise to the Swiss approach also apply in the Baltic case. First and foremost, the regular armed forces of the Baltic states are no match for those of the potential adversary, and a permanent defeat and occupation or annexation would lead to a loss of freedom and sovereignty that could last for generations. Thus, resistance is critical to national survival, and a credible and demonstrated will to resist may deter aggression by increasing the potential cost to the adversary. Both Switzerland and the Baltic states have a tradition of resisting invaders: Recent polling in Estonia showed that approximately 80 percent of the population would support armed resistance in

case of invasion, and a similar percentage of military-age Estonian men said they would be willing to participate in defense activities (Kivirähk, 2015).

Decentralized resistance, one of the key elements of the Swiss approach, is particularly suitable for scenarios in which the aggressor can be expected to attack communication nodes first, disrupting centralized command and control; Russia did just this in Crimea. Furthermore, even though Russia's recent actions have been heavy on stealth and subversion and light on overt military action, an attack against the Baltics could involve a less restrained use of military force, which is a threat that the Swiss approach was specifically designed to counter.



U.S. ARMY/SSGT TIMOTHY KOSTER

An Estonian conscript examines an M9 pistol at an exhibition of U.S. military weapons, equipment, and vehicles, held in conjunction with a U.S.-led NATO interoperability exercise, November 7, 2014.

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## *Modern capabilities will affect the balance of power between invaders and resisters, both at the tactical level and strategically.*

Finally, in both the Swiss and Baltic examples, other countries can be expected to eventually provide relief in case of attack. Resisters only need to buy time and keep the invader from consolidating gains, rather than having to stand alone against overwhelming odds.

However, there are differences that highlight the need for careful analysis before any specific measures from the Swiss approach are adapted for the defense of the Baltic states. For example, Swiss society is relatively homogenous, while the Baltic states have significant minorities of ethnic Russians and Russian citizens, with varying degrees of loyalty to their host nation (Kivirähk, 2015). This poses a challenge to creating defensive capabilities based on an empowered citizenry, since such capabilities could subsequently be abused by Russian loyalists or, conversely, by misguided citizens targeting members of the Russian minority.

Furthermore, Swiss culture emphasizes national defense, and military-style marksmanship is a Swiss national pastime. Most Swiss men are reservists who, under the Swiss militia system, are required to keep their military-issue gear at home, including their rifle. The Baltic states, despite their history of armed resistance to Soviet occupation, have much stricter controls on civilian possession of weapons and a significantly lower rate of civilian firearm ownership (Alpers and Wilson, 2015). These characteristics increase the barriers to establishing effective resistance organizations.

Geography presents another key difference: Switzerland's mountainous topography is generally considered easier to defend than the coastal flatlands of the Baltic states. The difference in topography also means that the regular armed forces of the Baltics will have no alpine *rédut* to fall back to and operate from. Support for irregular forces in the Baltics would likely have to come from abroad, via sea and air.

Furthermore, the Swiss approach was designed for Cold War-era technologies, but modern capabilities, such as unmanned aerial systems, cyber technologies, and communication networks, will affect the balance of power between invaders and resisters, both at the tactical level and strategically. For example, aggressor use of infrared sensors would make it more difficult for resistance units or even individuals to operate undetected under cover of darkness. On the other hand, modern technologies can also work as a force multiplier for small, decentralized resistance units; for example, resistance fighters could use commercially available semi-autonomous air vehicles for reconnaissance and to gather video footage for their IO efforts.

Finally, Switzerland's neutral status gives it more latitude in planning its defense strategy. Any unconventional concepts that the Baltic states might want to implement would have to pass muster with NATO—if not formally, then at least in the court of public opinion in NATO countries. This requirement might preclude some of the more controversial unconventional options, like instructing resistance members on how to carry out assassinations. This is a particular concern because Russia could be expected to mount a propaganda campaign aimed at the populations of NATO countries to limit the range of defense options considered acceptable for the Baltic states.



Further research is needed to explore these and other related issues in sufficient depth. While it may turn out that some of the tactics that are part of the Swiss approach may not be viable in the Baltic context, many of the underlying principles and concepts should remain applicable.

## **Toward an Unconventional Strategy for Baltic Defense**

An integrated unconventional strategy for the defense of the Baltic states could include an adaptation of the Swiss approach, augmented by elements taken from the Baltics' own tradition of resistance (see Laar, 1992; Mankevičius and Daugirdas, 2002), as well as from modern U.S. unconventional warfare and counter-insurgency doctrine.<sup>7</sup> This would strengthen the efforts that are already under way in the region.

Assessing the potential impact of such an unconventional strategy, identifying the drivers for its success or failure, and subsequently refining it for optimal impact will be difficult. The Swiss, of course, have never had to put their approach to the test, and while there are examples of “decentralized resistance” concepts being used in actual wars (e.g., by Iraqi *fedayeen* during the invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom), there are enough differences in the details to preclude a simple analysis by analogy. However, a game-based approach could enable the required holistic assessment and would provide a fertile ground for generating additional candidate concepts. An analytic game could also help stakeholders



ESTONIAN DEFENCE LEAGUE/CPL MADIS VELTMAN, ESTONIAN ARMY

*An Estonian Defence League militia mortar unit prepares to fire during a November 2013 NATO Response Force exercise.*

become more familiar with each other, thus strengthening networks within the community of interest.

Studying the Cold War–era Swiss approach can thus inform the development of unconventional options for defending the Baltic states against foreign aggression. Despite some differences in context, its underlying concepts can provide the foundation for creating specific guidance for modern-day resistance organizations, as part of an effective defensive strategy that is sustainable in the long term.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Decisionmaking in such a case would be complicated by the mixed views held by the populations of Western European NATO members regarding coming to the aid of new NATO members, such as the Baltic states (see Simmons, Stokes, and Poushter, 2015). For more on the strategic importance of such a decision, see *United States National Security Strategy* (2015, p. 25) and NATO (2014).

<sup>2</sup> While this perspective references the Swiss defense strategy in the modern era, particularly during the Cold War, the Swiss have a long history of deterring invasions. For more on this, see Mantovani (2012). The Swiss approach is only one of many historical examples of decentralized resistance to invasion, though it is beyond the scope of this perspective to compare it to other implementations (e.g., the Romanian or Finnish models) or to determine the “best” approach for the Baltic states. For more on unconventional warfare concepts employed in the Baltics during and after World War II, see Kaszeta (1988), Laar (1992), and Petersen (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Most of the information on the Swiss approach summarized here is based on von Dach’s seminal 1957 work, *Der Totale Widerstand—Kleinkriegsanleitung für Jedermann* [*Total Resistance—Small War Instructions for Everyone*]. Even though this commercially published book was never official Swiss doctrine, it reflected Swiss thinking on defense (though some Swiss leadership had opposing views), and it was made widely available to Swiss citizens and to anyone else who wanted to buy a copy. In comparison, other Western nations kept a close hold on equivalent contemporary publications, such as the U.S. Army’s 1951 Field Manual 31-21, *Organization and Conduct of Guerrilla Warfare*.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Army unconventional warfare doctrine specifies that resistance members should operate under a responsible leader, wear insignia like armbands that are visible at average engagement distances, and carry their weapons in the open, at least while engaged in combat operations (see Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the Swiss Army has been dismantling these integrated demolition charges. See Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection, and Sport (2015).

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of the symbology used in this figure, see U.S. Department of Defense (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Examples of modern U.S. unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency doctrine include Army Training Circular 7-100.3, *Irregular Opposing Forces* (2014); Training Circular 18-01, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare* (2011); and Army Doctrine and Training Publication 3-05.1, *Unconventional Warfare* (2013). An analysis of these and other sources, including comparisons to the Swiss approach, should certainly be part of any related future research.

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## About This Perspective

Before and during the Cold War, Swiss defense strategy included elements of unconventional warfare that were designed to help the small nation deter—and, if needed, defend itself from—invasion by a much more powerful aggressor. This subject has obvious relevance to the situation in which the Baltic states found themselves at the time of this writing. Some of the context is clearly different, but there are enough similarities for elements of this “Swiss approach” to be of potential value for the defense of Baltic NATO members against current threats. This RAND perspective outlines the concepts and elements of this approach and discusses how they may be of use in this context.

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